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ABSTRACT

One of the Afro-American writers who spoke out clearly during the postreconstruction period was Albery A. Whitman (1851-1902). A romantic poet, Whitman produced seven volumes of poetry. His profound belief in freedom and equality for his race is expressed forcefully in two long narrative poems, "Not a Man and Yet a Man" and "The Rape of Florida." In these poems, he used introductory passages, dedications, plots, and digressions from his stories to convey sentiments echoed by other blacks in pulpit, press, classroom, and convention hall--the creeds of self-help, self-trust, determination, and defiance of all that denies a person's humanity. (JM)

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Albery Whitman, a Rebellious Romantic

Carl L. Marshall

The period after the Reconstruction was a barren one in both the lives and the literature of Afro-Americans. Legislators had rejected the reforms that would have improved the quality of life in the South. And except for the schools established by religious organizations and the Freedmen's Bureau, there were few signs of progress. On the contrary, from 1877 there was a surge of Jim Crow laws in America, systematically stripping the rights and privileges of Negroes and virtually reducing them to peonage in the South. The invalidation of the Civil Rights Act in 1883 gave impetus to a trend already spurred by lynching and other forms of mass violence. There was a universal outcry of protest in the North and, for a time, the South. Although some people felt that submissiveness might prove effectual, and others trusted God, "the majority of articulate Negroes did not adopt this accommodating approach."[1] They spoke out clearly for freedom and justice--in histories, biographies, essays, and creative works.

One of these writers, Albery A. Whitman (1851-1902), deserves to be known for his racial protest as well as his poetry. (Surely Professor Joan Sherman is right in naming him the best Black American poet before Dunbar, if indeed he does not rival the laureate.[2]) Unfortunately, Whitman wrote at a time when there was little or no audience for a Black poet who disregarded dialect verse and dealt boldly with the harsh realities of Afro-American life. America, intent on the Gospel of Wealth and reconciliation of North and South, disdained and ignored strident notes of protest. Apparently, Whitman found a sympathetic ear only when he gave platform-readings. None the less, this poet and practicing minister, who had no more than thirteen months of formal schooling at Troy, Ohio, and Wilberforce University, produced seven volumes of poetry.

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In his long narrative poems Not a Man and Yet a Man (Springfield, Ohio: Republic Printing Co., 1877; rpt. Mnemosyne Publishing Co., Miami, Fla., 1969) and The Rape of Florida (St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Printing Co., 1884; rpt. Mnemosyne Publishing Co., Miami, Fla., 1969), Whitman expressed strong racial feelings. He used introductory passages, dedications, plots, and digressions from his stories to convey sentiments echoed by other Black men in pulpit and press, classroom and convention hall. Notwithstanding his use of idealized heroes of mixed or Indian blood, Whitman never lets us forget his profound belief in freedom and equality for his race.

The Preface to Not a Man stresses the creed of self-help, evident in both the purpose of Wilberforce and the remarkable advancement in Whitman's own life: "An aim to inspire and increase in the pupil self-respect, self-control and self-development." The poet states that poverty and lack of support were serious obstacles to Negroes. But Wilberforce University fostered study, thought, effort. There the student learned "that if he cannot excel, he can do something else--he can do what he can--he can try--he can dare to fail."[3] Whitman himself exemplified that creed in writing a monumental poem of nearly 5000 lines, using pentameter couplets, trimeters, unrhymed trochaic tetrameter, tetrameter couplets, and unrhymed hexameter and heptameter. In his next volume, The Rape of Florida, he dared even more: an epic romance of 257 Spenserian stanzas.

The 145-line Prologue of Not a Man is a poetic discourse on the historic development of freedom and the Black American's right to enjoy it. Whitman asserts that ever since the liberation of the Hebrews the idea of God and freedom has spread throughout the world. That eternal ideal had been upheld by Washington, Lincoln, John Brown, Charles Sumner--the latter pitting his all against slavery and for equal justice. Whitman appeals to

"right and common sense" and declares his aim to vindicate the Black man for his valor, fidelity, defense of his country, and worship of God. Black men had fought in the Revolutionary War; they had sought freedom and victory amid Union forces in the Civil War. And yet America continued to neglect and despise them. Whitman vows to immortalize his race in his poetry.

His story concerns the noble Rodney, a twenty-year-old youth with all the heroic virtues and skills. Though "eighty-five percent Saxon," Rodney is a slave in Saville, a frontier Illinois village before the Civil War. Except for the evil of Rodney's status, life in Saville seems admirable. But counter-poised with Saville is the Indian Sac Village, where Chief Pashepaho, his daughter Nanawawa, and their tribe live simply, ideally, in tune with nature. In the short subplot the lovely Nanawawa, though wooed by many suitors, chooses and unites with a young white captive, and the old chief dies. At this point, the latent evil in the white town springs to life. Hunters from Saville, led by Sir Maxey, loot an Indian village, and later one of them shoots Nanawawa. Indian warriors find her body, pursue the killers, and slay all of them except Sir Maxey, whose fleet horse saves him.

Coming upon Rodney in the woods, Maxey urges flight, but Rodney reproves his craven master, and he alone conquers the braves who attack him. Upon returning to Saville, he finds the villagers cowering in fear of an expected attack. Again he asserts his manliness and, inspired by young Dora Maxey, he goes to Fort Dearborn for help. That garrison can spare no men, and so Rodney retraces his steps. To his dismay, the village is in ruins; but he finds evidence that the beloved Dora has been carried away. He hunts down her captors, rescues her, and leads her to Dearborn. Ironically, even as they near the garrison, Sir Maxey (who has inexplicably

escaped from Saville without his daughter) is offering Dora and a bag of gold to any man who will save her. All are astounded when Dora appears, but they are not too disconcerted to revile Rodney as "a servant dog, a stalwart negro clown" who could not possibly be a contender for Dora's hand. And Sir Maxey villainously sells Rodney down the river to Memphis.

Eventually, Rodney becomes the slave of Mosher Aylor in Florida. The hero falls in love with a beautiful young Creole slave named Leeona, whom Aylor desires. When Aylor espies the lovers meeting at night, he imprisons Rodney. With Leeona's help, Rodney escapes, taking refuge in a wooded cave. The lustful Aylor rapes Leeona, and subsequently she bears a child. Rodney, anguished by uncertainty, makes his way to Leeona at night, and the lovers vow to seek freedom. While Leeona flees with her babe, Rodney destroys the men and dogs pursuing her, and rejoins her in the forest. Then they follow the north star. After months of hazardous journeying, Rodney and Leeona make their way to Sussex Vale, Canada, where they marry and live happily among a host of warm friends. Some time later, the former Dora Maxey appears with her Good Samaritan husband, acknowledges her indebtedness to Rodney, and offers a home and a life of ease in Montreal. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, Rodney and his two sons join the Union Army. Miraculously, Rodney chances upon a dying Confederate soldier--Mosher Aylor. With his last words Aylor pleads to God for mercy, confesses his sins, and begs Rodney and Leeona to forgive him.

Whitman achieves notable unity of purpose and effect in Not a Man. In spite of romantic extravagances, his narrative emphasizes the American ideal of freedom, humanitarianism, and democracy. The subplot balances the idyllic primitivism of the Indian Sac village against the spurious goodness of white Saville. The hero Rodney, "eighty-five percent Saxon," is repeatedly

compared and contrasted with his slave masters, to his unquestionable advantage. Obviously the characterization of Rodney suggests, not the denial of the heroic possibilities of Black men, as several critics have noted, but rather the glorification of his fifteen percent Afro-American heritage--that element which distinguishes him from Sir Maxey and Mosher Aylor.

In his first major digression, Whitman denounces Memphis, "the pride of the South," as the site of crass materialism and evil, fostering slavery, crime, war, famine, ignorance. As a narrator in the midst of the scene, he depicts feelingly the inhumanity of slavery, evoking memories of passages from David Walker and the early Frederick Douglass. The poet intrudes again with a passage on Kentucky. This beautiful, proud state had not realized its high ideals and promise, for it had shared in the pollution of slavery. Yet Whitman professes love for his state; he prays for the elevation of life there, so that he can be proud of his home.

Whitman uses the last pages of the poem to express his social and religious ideas. He begs America to turn aside from the past, to bind its wounds and build toward the future. He asserts that Black men, who have fought bravely in the past, will, if necessary, fight again. In as much as the will of God was made manifest in the war, the poet hopes for a return to the right path--of peace, order, and freedom for all men:

> And let the humblest tenant of the fields,
> Secured of what his honest labor yields,
> Pursue his calling, ply his daily care,
> His home adorn and helpless children rear,
> Assured that while our flag above him flies,
> No lawless hand can dare molest his joys. (NM, p. 209)

Whitman proceeds to glorify the concept of Freedom--in prophecy and in prayer. For him it involves the ownership of land, the opportunity for individual development, education for all people, and full equality.

> Free schools, free press, free speech, and equal laws,
> A common country and a common cause,
> Are only worthy of a freeman's boasts--
> Are Freedom's real and intrinsic costs. (NM, p. 212)

The Dedication in Whitman's next poem, The Rape of Florida, expresses his faith in the future of Negro people and his great desire to be heard by America. He accepts the conditions of life and rejects "whining over previous condition."

> Petition and complaint are the language of imbecility and cowardice.... The time has come when all "Uncle Toms" and "Topsies" ought to die. Goody Goodness is a sort of man worship: ignorance is its inspiration; fear its ministering spirit, and beggary its inheritance. (RF, pp. 3-4)

The poet refers to his own life:

> I was in bondage,--I never was a slave,--the infamous laws of a savage despotism took my substance--what of that? Many a man has lost all he had, excepting his manhood. Adversity is the school of heroism, endurance the majesty of man and hope the torch of high aspirations. (RF, p. 4; repeated in II,xi)

The Rape of Florida consists of four cantos, the first including a six-stanza invocation. This poem dramatizes on a larger scale the human struggle for freedom and justice, carried on unflaggingly against oppression. It tells how the Seminole Indians, with their Maroon allies of mixed blood, and fugitive slaves they had befriended, were forcibly removed from Florida to Mexico. Atlassa, a young Seminole chief with all the ideal qualities of a warrior and leader, loves Ewald, the beautiful Maroon daughter of old Chief Palmecho. Their peaceful existence is shattered when the United States army launches surprise attacks on them. Even though Atlassa and his braves fight valiantly, they are overcome by treachery and overwhelming odds. The survivors are shipped in chains to Santa Rosa, where, saddened, but undaunted, they seek to build a new life in accordance with God and nature.

In this diffuse, loosely structured poem, Whitman comments widely

on love, nature, religious faith, honor, freedom--especially freedom. But the strength of his racial feelings is demonstrated by his use of the first twenty-one stanzas of Canto II to air his views. Greatness, Whitman declares, is an individual sealed book, known only by God. Color of skin is no measure of manhood, for genius will overcome caste. It is man's duty not to beg, not to seek permission or favor, but to use his God-given mind and imagination freely. Hatred directed toward one's race is perhaps no worse than quiet submission to and acceptance of an image of unworthiness. Whitman presents a creed of self-trust, determination, and defiance of all that denies his humanity:

> Oh! let me see the negro, night and morn,
> Pressing and fighting in, for place and power!
> If he a proud escutcheon would adorn,
> All earth is place--all time th' auspicious hour,
> While heaven leans forth to see, oh! can he quail or cower?
>
> Oh! I abhor his protest and complaint!
> His pious looks and patience I despise!
> He can't evade the test, disguised as saint,
> The manly voice of freedom bids him rise,
> And shake himself before Philistine eyes!
> And, like a lion roused, no sooner than
> A foe dare come, play all his energies,
> And court the fray with fury if he can;
> For hell itself respects a fearless manly man!
>
> (RF, II, vii, viii)

Nature teaches that earth offers nothing greater than freedom of the mind. If man is to achieve it, he must stand firm, invincible, against all odds. After denouncing race-hate and those who indulge in it, Whitman goes on to describe nature as a symbol of God, revealing the harmony and beauty of the universe and promoting man's highest qualities. Like the other, greater, Whitman, he can envision a world of peace, love, and brotherhood of men. But far from being a meek accommodationist, he is in these poems a voice of spirited protest.

Footnotes

[1]August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 74.

[2]Joan R. Sherman, "Albery Allson Whitman: Poet of Beauty and Manliness," CLAJ, 15.2 (Dec. 1971), 140-141.

[3]Not a Man and Yet a Man, p. 8.